

Where Gringos Don't Belong

"Who?" George Bynum stammered, trying to focus on what the caller was saying.

"María," the woman repeated, "From the Centro Oaxaqueño de Derechos Humanos. You wanted to talk with the *abogada*?"

"Pues, sí," he responded, puzzled. "But I didn't call, I—"

"Momentito, I'll tell you want to speak with her."

Am I on Planet X or what? He shook his head, aware that the three others in the apartment's small livingroom were looking at him. "This is..." *weird* he started to explain but Thelma Díaz's brisk, business-like Spanish interrupted.

"Jorge. Sorry for the subterfuge, I'll explain it. I just want you to know that the authorities transferred nine more prisoners from Nayarit to Tlacolula. Patricia's one of the nine."

She's in Tlacolula—"

"No. The plane carrying them landed this morning. Her mother came to meet her. How her mother got here so quickly I don't know—she must have driven like a bat out of hell. She and Pati should be back in Mexico City by now."

"Pati didn't—?"

"Look, Jorge, she made me promise not to contact you. Not to tell you she'd been released. She's a client—not only that a friend, a close friend. So I didn't contact you. María from here in the office did. María said you wanted to talk to me, that's why I'm giving you this information. Understand?"

"Sí, pues, but Pat—Pati, she—"

"Jorge, I met the plane. I hardly recognized her. She looked ten years older, angry, so angry she could kill but it's all inside her, it's going to take time for her to overcome it. Being with mother probably is the best place she could be—away from Oaxaca, away from the Popular Assembly, away from, well, us. You need to give her time, time to recover, time to shed some of what's tormenting her. You've got her phone number, no? Her mother said she's been in contact with you."

"Yeah, yeah, I—I'll call, call her there."

"Not right away, Jorge. Listen to me. Give her three days—three days at least if she doesn't call you. She's been through Hell—worse than Hell, she isn't herself, it's going to take time—a long time. All of them coming out, they're in shambles. Help Pati, don't push her. Give her time, okay?"

"Yeah," he sighed and slid the cell phone into his pocket. Claudi, María Sal and Nick peered questioningly at him.

"Pati," he told them, "she's been released."

"She's here!"

"No. Her mother picked her up. She's—she's in Mexico City."

Vaguely he heard them exclaim *Great! Wonderful! At last!* as he strode into his bedroom. He closed the door and buried his face in his hands. He desperately wanted to cry, to roll up into a tiny ball of tears, but tears wouldn't come. Just images he couldn't control—voices, Patricia's desperate call the night of the police assault, a released prisoner telling him *She looked like she was crying all of the time*. Words from before the militarized police assault when he and she were lovers, her strength, her laughter, all of it mixed up with the guilt he felt for having left her the night of the assault, for turning to Claudi for consolation...

Vaguely he heard someone rap lightly on the door, then open it. Without turning to look he knew it was Claudi.

“Jorge? You okay?”

He nodded, expecting her to put her arm around him, comfort him. But she remained apart and he realized that he needed to say something more.

“She, that is, Thelma, Thelma said Pati didn’t want to see me. She didn’t call. She, she doesn’t want me to contact her.”

“So this is about you? Your feelings? Not her?”

Her crisp urban Spanish, accusatory, drilled into him and he felt his shoulders stiffen.

“Both, about both. I, I just—“

“*Mira*. I think it’s wonderful she’s been released. It’s what we’ve wanted. María Sal and Nick and I are going to celebrate it with a toast. We’d like you to join us.”

The door closed with an abrupt *click!* He felt devastated, totally alone, as he sagged onto the bed. *Wonderful that she’s been released...* Slowly the jumbled images began to clear enough that he could picture Claudi, stiff, stern, as she’d stood behind him, asking—demanding—*so this is about you?* Inhaling deeply he stood up, opened the bedroom door and walked into the livingroom.

“I’m really thankful that’s she’s been released,” he said deliberately, facing the three of them and fighting to keep tremors from muffling the words. “It’s what I’ve been hoping for.”

Gray clouds blanketed the valley and a chill wind whipped dust and leaves across the airport parking lot. The van driver, cheerfully banal as he unloaded Nick’s suitcases, insisted on carrying them without Nick’s or George’s help despite his small stature. María Sal, prim and straight-backed in an ankle-length dark skirt and embroidered Oaxacan blouse, smiled zombie-like. Nick, nervous and impatient, alternated between boisterous laughter and wincing introspection. “I wish I could stay, I wish I could,” he repeated as María Sal pretended to pick at loose threads on her sleeve.

George nodded. “I’m walking on pretty thin ice myself.”

Claudi broke through to question times and itineraries—“Mexico City to Houston...Houston to where, San Francisco?...rent a car or spend the night there?” The last call to board echoed through the little terminal and Nick wrapped his arms around María Sal. She clung to him, rocking back and forth in his grasp, then pulled away, her cheeks beneath her glasses glistening. Clumsily banging his hand luggage against the X-ray check Nick turned to wave. George thrust his hand up to wave back and Claudi called “Remember, *Chingón*, behave or else!”

María Sal, beside her, stood with her hands folded in front of her, staring into space. As they turned towards the parking lot she murmured to all and to none of them, “I wonder if I’ll ever see him again?”

They assured her that she would and she nodded, a tight smile pinned against her teeth. Claudi squeezed her hand as the two of them sat side by side in the seat behind the driver. Claudi invited María Sal to join her and George for “coffee, *merienda*” but María Sal shook her head and asked the driver to drop her off at the university so could pick up her work and class schedules for the coming semester.

As George and Claudi hunched over cappuccinos and *pay de piña* in an Italian Coffee half-a-block from Oaxaca’s Zócalo, Claudi put her hand over his and asked, “Are you ready to talk about Patricia?”

He poked at his coffee with a little wooden stirrer. “I don’t...” he began and stopped. Turning to more directly face her, he coughed and pulled his glasses away from his face.

"It's, it's just that's it's hard to get to what I feel, it's not...simple." He paused and shook his head, squinting because the background blurred into forms and shadows without his corrective lenses. "I didn't, didn't picture her not wanting to see me. All the time she was in prison I pictured her getting out, I didn't know how she'd feel, what kind of shape she'd be in, but I pictured her here, I pictured being with her, introducing you to her. Maybe she and I going to a psychologist together, working through all that had happened one way or another. I even pictured her angry with me, hating me..."

"It's like, that is I remember in Afghanistan, for months—years—all we'd think about was getting out of the Army, out of that Godforsaken hellhole, but when they got discharged some of the guys crashed—really deep depressions, some even committed suicide. Why? I don't know, but it was like climbing a mountain, all you think about is getting to the top and then when you arrive you step into space, into a void, you don't know what to do."

"*Nos chingó la vida,*" she muttered and peered down the street, deserted except for a few teenagers huddled together in doorways, then folded her hands together atop the little glass-topped table.

"Okay, I need to tell you about something. And old friend of mine called me. Called me twice. He's—Jorge, don't look at me like that! This isn't goodbye!" Her smile flashed humor and affection and she tilted her head, momentarily a flirtatious coquette. "He wants to talk to me. To leave some stuff at my apartment. He's, see, in a bit of trouble. Nothing new, he's always in *jodido* trouble. He had to leave Mazatlán because the police have warrants out for him. Cocaine. Which ends of the transactions he was on he didn't say, just that somebody ratted. He's shaved his head, he's got a fake beard—he used to do theater, he knows about makeup, disguises—and he's going to cool it in Juxtlahuaca until they get tired of looking for him. Just so you know, okay?"

"But I will see you again? Sometime?"

"*Gacho!*" She kicked him so hard under the table it jarred cups and saucers, spilling cappuccino on the table. "So you don't trust me?"

"I trust you."

"Totally? Completely?"

He hesitated and she laughed gaily.

"Good! A little distrust is a good thing. A little wondering. A little uncertainty. Keeps things from getting boring."

"Trust me, *chica,*" he coughed, "no one will ever accuse you of being boring."

As George tried to get a waitress's attention so he could pay the bill Claudi grabbed his arm. "Listen! That noise?"

A barely audible rumble, like distant thunder, gradually became more distinct as other customers under the patio umbrellas turned to listen.

"Nick and I heard something about a protest on the radio this morning..." He cut the explanation short as two camouflage-painted convey trucks lurched to a stop in front of them. A dozen or more armed soldiers piled out and grouped confusedly into formation. Instinctively Claudi grabbed George's sleeve.

"*Vente,*" he pulled her towards the street. "Let's see how many they try to kill."

The soldiers broke formation and at a slow trot took positions along the street leading past the Cathedral where idle waiters and a few business-dressed customers were visible in the sidewalk cafes. As he glanced towards riot shields spaced evenly apart on the paving stones in front of the soldiers, George shook aside images of nineteen- and twenty-year-olds in Afghanistan. Lieber, he remembered, had temporarily gone mad, shouting, "We've got to stop! We've got to

stop! We're children killing children!" and the military police had taken him into medical custody until he could be shipped back to the States.

"Hey? You okay?"

"Afghanistan," he grunted. "Memories." He felt her fingers press tightly into his arm.

"You need to tell me...sometime."

He nodded, motioning in the direction of the chanting. Male voices from the front of the march shouted slogans that those behind them answered. Two video photographers skittered in front of the protesters, stumbling and almost falling as they tried to keep their balance without turning away from their filming. The surge abated momentarily as those hefting a huge banner shouted for support to get it through the barriers. It nearly was as wide as the street itself, professionally lettered in black except for the word *ASESINOS!* printed in dripping scarlet. "Shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow, we are the pueblo, we will overcome!" reverberated past soldiers restlessly fondling their truncheons. March monitors called to the protesters to stay together and avoid confrontations as they filed into the *Zócalo*.

"*Mira!*" George directed Claudi's gaze towards the rooftop across the street.

"*Hijos de la chingada!*" she hissed, detecting uniformed guards peering down as the marchers crowded around the elevated bandstand in the center of the *Zócalo*, "another massacre!"

"I don't think so. But watch if infiltrators in the crowd try to provoke something."

She tried to pull him back towards the coffee shop. He resisted.

"*Mira*, the *pendejo* with the camera phone. See him? Ten'll get you a hundred he's a cop."

"How do you know?"

"Haircut. Who else do you see with hair that short? Sunglasses--those aren't the kind of shades teachers wear. See! He's snapping pictures of people in the crowd. *Cabrón!*"

Claudi clutched his arm even more tightly as he pointed towards a cluster of teenagers, two with dreadlocks, others wearing shredded Levi jackets, *paliacates* around their foreheads.

"If anything starts, it will be with them. *Porros*—the government pays them to do dirty work."

He pulled her closer to the bandstand as the *Zócalo* continued to fill, some demonstrators standing on benches, others sidling behind the ring of armed soldiers and police. An officer, portable radio pressed against one ear, ordered the file in front of the restaurants on the west side of the *Zócalo* to form a tight formation further away as a protester set up portable sound equipment and a trumpet player bleated a martial call. A rotund protester raised his clenched fist and shouted, "Free the political prisoners! *Ahora!*" Hundreds of voices in the crowd responded, "*Ahora! 'hora! 'hora!*" As more people pushed in around them Claudi looped her arm through George's. Her face, her eyes, had a wild look, like a trapped animal ready to attack if it couldn't find a way of escape.

"Are you..?"

"I need to get out of here!"

He felt her fingers bite into his arm and he nodded.

"C'mon."

He lowered his shoulder and with her stumbling behind him pushed through demonstrators pressing forward around them. At the corner, before passing back through the metal barriers, he turned to listen to the speaker's shouted rhetoric. Always the same, he muttered to himself, like the football cheers he'd so despised in high school, like his Army drill sergeants spouting patriotic nonsense. Yet it gave people a feeling of being together, of being united in a cause.

"*Amor*. Come on!"

He let her lead now, past the sentries and the demonstrators siphoning through the barriers. Half-a-block down Hidalgo, in front of one of the shops that had locked iron grates pulled over its display windows, she turned to face him.

"*Hijole!* Don't-give-a-shit Claudi just had a panic attack." She put her forehead against his chest, her shoulders heaving from the deep breaths she was taking. "I was afraid. I could imagine them taking you away. Or you—you doing something, grabbing one of their guns and killing half-a-dozen of them."

He grunted something resembling laughter and rubbed her back. "That's kamikaze stuff. You want to take out somebody you make sure you have a plan. A safe escape."

"You scare me when you say things like that."

"Scare you? Why?"

"I, I don't know. Because, see, I've known lots of types, dopers, cons, *cabrones*, some of them even have gone around waving guns, shit like that. But, see, you're probably the nicest guy I've ever hung out with—smart, clean, honest. Then you say something like that, say it so calmly, it's like a door opens and I see a part of you I've never seen before, it's like you really could do it, do it and get away with it. It gives me the shivers."

Rubbing her back again he nodded, seeing Afghanistan not the stone and brick of the Centro Historico. With a dozen others, the communications equipment he'd been carrying forcing him to climb doubled over, he'd reached the jagged hilltop where assault planes had wiped out Taliban insurgents. But instead of insurgents there were the bodies of mutilated women and children, Rosario babbling, vomiting, Maloney shouting "Bastards! Bastards! Bastards!" and nobody knowing whether he meant the flyboys or the Taliban.

He put his arm around her shoulders and peered past the building tops. Through a slight haze the sky was blue—as it had been in Afghanistan—with a scattering of barely visible clouds. Behind them, as they turned north on Díaz Ordaz, he could hear applause and cheers. Halfway to Independencia three pickups filled with uniformed municipal police swerved past them. "No guns," he repeated, feeling Claudi's shoulders grow tense within his grasp.

Her apartment's kitchenette being too small for the two of them he carried two plastic chairs from the livingroom to the patio. While he was waiting for her to fix the hot chocolate she'd promised he decided to call Carmela, Patricia's roommate. Carmela answered on the third ring. "Jorge? Oh, *pues, como, como estás?*"

"I wasn't sure if you knew. Pati's been released. She's—"

"*Sí, pues sí.*" She sighed and cleared her throat. "I, *pues*, called Thelma. She told me. I—I haven't heard from Pati—she didn't call me. Thelma said, *pues*, that Pati told her not to tell anybody, contact anybody. But she called you?"

"No, I learned from Thelma."

"*Chispas*, I feel like bawling for what they did to her. I mean, if she weren't, weren't I don't know, so hurt, so mixed up, she'd want to talk to us. She was always the most, you know, sane, rational, the first one to think about other people."

Fighting a tightening in his throat he mumbled an affirmation as Carmela went on babbling that the imprisonment had affected Patricia's mind and that maybe in her parents' house, resting, forgetting, she would recover. As Claudi stepped onto the patio balancing two steaming cups, *pan de yema* buns, a knife and a little cup of butter on a serving plate he promised Carmela that he'd call her as soon as he talked to Patricia or heard from her or her mother.

"Carmela," he responded to Claudi's questioning glance. "I called her. Pati told Thelma not to contact her."

"So you're not the only one?"

"Apparently."

Upper lip sucked between her teeth, Claudi nodded and placed the plate on the walkway in front of the two chairs.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Thelma said—suggested—that I wait three or four days before I try to contact Pati.” Picturing Patricia’s probable rejection, he winced. “Actually I’ll call Juana—her mother. I’ll tell her that I very much want to talk to Pati, that I’m worried about her, that I want to know if she’s all right.”

“And if her mother says Pati doesn’t want to talk to you?”

“I’ll tell Juana that I’ll call her back in a few days to check.”

“And if Pati does want to see you?”

“I’ll go to Mexico to see her.”

“And me? What about me?”

“I’ll...” he hesitated, then, impulsively, “I’ll bring you a sixteen-year-old stud from barrio.”

“*Chinga!* You’d stay to watch? I bet we could put on quite a show.”

“I’ll bet you could.”

“*Chingaderas*, you wouldn’t and I wouldn’t. Seriously, what about me?”

He started to reach for her, then withdrew and pressed the tips of his fingers together.

“I want to see Pati. I want to talk to her. I don’t know that we’ll ever...be like we were before, I don’t know that. But I feel responsible. I shouldn’t have left her the night she was arrested. If she doesn’t want me, that’s one thing, I can understand that that. But I can’t add to what she’s been through by, by deserting her. Not right now.”

He shook his head and shoved his fingers under his glasses to rub his eyes.

“And I won’t desert you. I—I want her to know what close friends we’ve been, how much you’ve helped, I mean, I lo-...”

Again he reached towards her and again withdrew his hand.

“Say it, Jorge. I want to hear you say it.”

“I love you.”

Her smile seemed to want to express some secret that she couldn’t—or wouldn’t—disclose. But the unspoken phrase, *so how much time do we give Patricia?* hung between them. “I forgot spoons,” she mumbled, stepping towards the door.

“And you? Your plan?”

She turned, surprised by the question.

“Me? I keep walking the tightrope I’m on, try not to fall. They didn’t take my lover to prison. I didn’t lose my job. I’ve thought about going all out to take you away from her, don’t think I haven’t. I’ve imagined it. But I can’t because it wouldn’t be right between us, you’d always wonder, feel I don’t know what—guilty. That’s why we’re not screwing our little brains out. It wouldn’t last—we wouldn’t last. Then you’d’ve lost both me and Pati.

“So I try to keep my balance. Do all I can to get you two back on course. Maybe ten kids from now you and she’ll get tired of each other and it’ll be you and me? Maybe not. Maybe it’ll be you and me sooner than that. Maybe next week. Maybe never. I don’t know.

“Like climbing that mountain. It’s a *jodido* tough climb. But maybe when we get to the top it won’t like falling into a void. Maybe it’ll be like flying?”

She grinned suddenly. “You and me flying. I like that.”

“I do too,” he admitted and motioned for her to come sit beside him. “Forget the spoons. We can stir our chocolate with the knife.”